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ABSTRACT

This report concentrates on languages and is part of a working copy being revised for inclusion into a curriculum manual for preschool teachers. In encouraging children to speak, some Do's and Don't's are presented, such as not correcting the grammar or pronunciation of a young child, and not relying on non-verbal gestures in giving instructions. The importance of conversing with a child instead of lecturing, and stimulating him with divergent questions are thought to be of help. Games and activities, having fun with languages, are suggested. The teacher must establish a way to relate to the child by speaking to him in a natural tone. The three chapters are concerned with: I. Encouraging Children to Speak; II. Helping Children Learn To Name, Describe, and Relate Things, People, Places, and Events; and III. Preparing Children to Read and Write. (For Related Documents, see: PS 006 089-093.) (RG)

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LANGUAGE

In the Cognitive Preschool Model

High/Scope Educational Research
Foundation
Preschool Department

Ypsilanti • Michigan

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THIS IS A WORKING COPY. It is being revised for inclusion in a curriculum manual we hope to publish in 1972.

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HIGH/SCOPE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION
PRESCHOOL DEPARTMENT

LANGUAGE AND TEACHING IN THE COGNITIVE CURRICULUM

"Can I play, too?"

"What's that big thing over there?"

"Look, the chair makes me tall like you!"

"My crayon is longer than yours!"

"Rosa's my friend."

"You're nice."

Language is the most important means by which people communicate their thoughts and feelings to others; it is a tool for thinking, helping us represent and make sense of our experiences and to solve problems.

In our preschool activities, learning begins with action, and language is always tied to what the child is doing. This means that the teacher relates language to the child's actions; language is not a separate "subject" but part of learning to understand and represent relations in time and space and to group and order things and events.

One of the most important contributions a teacher can make is to help children understand and use spoken language. Talking with other people extends the child's knowledge of the world and broadens his perspectives. Mastery of spoken language also provides skills fundamental to reading and writing.

"Silence is golden" is obviously not a good rule for our preschool classrooms!

In the following pages, we will consider three major goals for preschool involving the use of language:

1. Encouraging children to speak

2. Helping children use language more precisely to represent concepts and feelings; using words and the structure of language to convey information; naming, describing, and relating people, places, things, events

3. Giving children experiences with words and written language that will help them learn to read and write

These goals do not represent a sequence that must always be followed; some children, for example, will not need encouragement to speak. On the other hand, it wouldn't make sense to work on number 3 (pre-reading experiences) if this replaces number 2 (learning the meanings of words); and it wouldn't make sense to stress the precise use of language to convey information if the child becomes afraid to say something "wrong" and so learns not to speak in school.

1. Encouraging Children To Speak

Some Do's and Don't's

Arrange the room so that kids will interact with each other in small groups (not an all-eyes-to-the-teacher-sit-up-straight-and-be-quiet kind of room).

Provide equipment for role playing.

Have equipment that naturally stimulates spoken language, for example, tape recorders, telephones, walkie-talkies.

Have times scheduled in the routine for verbal planning and reviewing.

Don't give children the impression that "good" children are always quiet.

Converse with children. Don't just lecture at them or remain silent. Listen to what they are saying. Talk about what they are interested in.

Provide experiences that naturally stimulate discussion: a field trip, a new pet in the classroom, building a garage...

Don't correct the grammar or pronunciation of young children. We are trying to help children learn that language is useful and want to avoid making them feel they don't speak "right." Let children know that you are getting their messages, even though their messages may not always be phrased as you would phrase them.

Don't rely on non-verbal gestures (e.g., pointing) in giving children instructions.

Have fun with spoken language: tell stories, read poems, make up stories and poems with children.

2. Helping Children Learn To Name, Describe, and Relate Things, People, Places, and Events

These are very basic goals in our curriculum. We will treat them in greater detail when we consider the concepts we group under the headings CLASSIFICATION, SERIATION, SPATIAL RELATIONS, and TEMPORAL RELATIONS.

It is important to remember that although there is a verbal or language component to each of the concepts we are helping children to understand, we cannot "teach" these concepts as if the child merely needed to learn a word to understand a concept. Physical and logical principles are learned through active experience; words provide convenient "handles" for both the teacher and the child, but using a word like "red" or "between" or "after" does not teach these concepts.

In the process of learning, language accompanies action; it does not replace it, just as pictures do not fully substitute for the real experience. When a word or phrase a child does not comprehend is introduced, the teacher should attempt to use it as the child experiences the concept it represents. She should not insist on immediate repetition of the word or phrase by the child; the child will gradually learn the new concept and be able to use the new term that labels it if he is given the appropriate active experiences.

What Are Some Things the Teacher Can Do To Help Children Use Language To Describe and Relate?

A. Games and Activities. Have fun with language! Here is one example:

> After a field trip to the zoo, and after many concrete experiences with real animals and with representation of animals in the classroom (playing with toy animals, imitating the sounds and movement of animals), the teacher can introduce a riddle game. This is a good group time activity:
>
> Teacher: "I am very, very tall and have a long, long neck. What am I?"
>
> The aim should be for the children themselves to make up riddles. In this activity, the child must imagine object characteristics and actions. Used in this way, imagination is not "fantasy" but a way of thinking about the real world. The child must tap the pictures, or images, in his mind that have been built up through his experiences. And he must associate with those images words that describe what, in this case, the animal does, what it looks like, feels like, smells like.

Below are some more ideas for language games. In discussing or thinking about how to apply these and your own ideas in the classroom, it would be useful to keep in mind these questions:

(1) How would this activity fit in a learning sequence? In other words, what concrete experiences should precede it?

(2) What do I want the children to learn by playing this game? Or is the goal to see what they already have learned?

(3) What will be happening in the child's mind when he plays this game? For example, will the child be using his imagination in the way this was defined above?

(4) Is the activity best for work time, group time, circle time? Can it be adapted for use during different periods?

(5) Will the children be interested in it? Is it too advanced for them, or not advanced enough?

(6) How can I get the children actively involved in the game?

Now here are the suggestions:

Making up songs and stories

Making up poems

Rhyming

Supplying the missing word in a sentence

Using words that sound like some thing or some action (walking down the stairs and saying "plunk, plunk")

Making obvious mistakes (doing the opposite of what you say you'll do in Follow The Leader)

Using the wrong word in the right place: "I am going to the grocery store to buy an elephant, and then I'm going to the zoo to see the watermelon")

Acting out the meanings of words

Thinking of many different words to describe an object, animal, person, or fantasy creature (ghost, monster, good fairy)

Making believe you're someone else and speaking like him

Speaking one way and acting another (frown and say in a tearful voice, "I feel so happy today")

B. Questioning the Child. Questioning is valuable in helping children to understand the meaning of their actions. Some types of questions are more helpful in the Cognitive Curriculum than others. Divergent questions, questions which have more than one possible answer, are much more valuable than convergent questions, questions which have only one correct answer. Divergent questions such as, "What are some things we could put in this jar?" encourage the child to think for himself and be creative. Convergent questions such as, "What is in this jar?", answer, "Water," teach the child that there is only one way to answer a question and that the teacher knows it. They also make it likely that children will give "wrong" answers and begin to see themselves as not very smart.

Here are a few examples of divergent questions:

"What can we use for pretend trucks?"

"Here is a tire. What can we do with it?"

"What are some things we can do with this apple?"

Divergent questions are used for extending the child's play and "stretching" his mind rather than for simply testing him. In order to ask the right question at the right time the teacher must use non-verbal as well as verbal techniques to "tune in" to the child. She must watch how the child uses the materials in the classroom and how he functions with other children; she must listen to what he says when they converse and note how he responds to her questions and directions. A danger in focusing only on language development is the possibility of considering the child who speaks often to be "brighter" than the child who does not. Two children operating at similar levels of understanding can vary greatly in their use of language - a child may be receptive to the speech of others but not able to use language as well as he uses actions to express himself.

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Therefore the teacher must be able to respect a child's silence when he is concentrating on something; being a quiet person is one way to be a person. But since, as we've said, language is so important for thinking and expressing thoughts, the teacher must know how to draw language from the child who needs her help and encouragement.

For example, the teacher would not say, "What can we use for pretend trucks?" when the child is working on an art project and is obviously not interested in trucks at the moment. When the question comes naturally out of the situation, when it is relevant to the child's interests and actions, then it is likely to be a question that helps the child learn to think.

While it is helpful to use divergent questioning to extend the child's play at the moment, such questioning can be used in more abstract

ways - to help the child see the relation between past experiences and present actions and, what is even more complex, to help the child make generalizations.

Here's an example of this kind of sequence:

(1) Early in the school year, a child is playing house in the doll area, using cooking utensils, dolls, furniture, and clothing. The teacher says: "Can you show me what things we'll need for cooking?" (and for sleeping, eating, dressing, etc.).

(2) At some later time, the teacher asks the same child, who is making a house with large blocks, if he remembers what things he needs in the house for cooking, etc.

(3) Still later in the school year, the group is taking a walk in town, and the child remarks as he watches a car pass by, "You know what? People need cars to take them places."

Teacher: "That's right. And how else can people get places?"

Child: "Airplane."

Teacher: "What if you didn't have a car or an airplane?"

Child: "You could walk."

Teacher: "Yes. And then I guess you'd need shoes."

Child: "And a hat if it's raining."

Teacher: "People sure need a lot of things. Clothes to keep them warm and - "

Child: "And houses so they'll have a place to sleep." (As they pass by a house).

Teacher: "Can you think of other things people need?"

Child: (Looking around him): "Sidewalks to walk on . . . You know what? I know all about people."

In (1), the child is playing with realistic representations, or objects that stand for other objects. The teacher's question is directed to helping the child group these objects, and she doesn't expect him to respond verbally - not because he is "slow" but because it is early in the school year, she doesn't really know him yet, and she doesn't know what his abilities are, either verbal or non-verbal.

In (2), the child does not have the toys that stand for cooking utensils, etc., and the teacher's question is directed to helping him remember (think of) the kinds of things people need in a house.

In (3), the teacher picks up on something the child says and, seeing that he understands the general concept of "things people need", helps him to make further generalizations.

There are several things to notice in this example. One is that the teacher's interaction is with only one child. This was done to point up the importance of the teacher's sensitivity to the abilities of individual children. The sequence from concrete to abstract was possible only because the teacher was able to "tune in" to the child. The teacher knew when he was ready to go further in his thinking; she knew that when he said, "People need cars to take them places," he was probably able to think of many other things people need. The child drew upon what he saw around him and, with the teacher's help, added phrases that told what things are for: "Sidewalks to walk on." He was also able to imagine something that he didn't see - "a hat if it's raining." The teacher could follow up on this with questions that would encourage the child to imagine, or think of, things people would need or need to do in particular circumstances. Divergent questioning, then, leads to divergent thinking - imagining various possibilities.

Finally, notice that the teacher did not only question the child - she talked with him and made statements of her own to draw him out. It is possible to think of many techniques or methods for stimulating a child to express his ideas in words, but these will not work unless the teacher has established a way of relating to the child through language. This means talking to a child naturally, in conversation, so that learning goals become part of a situation in which teacher and child are doing and talking together.

C. Responding to the Child's Questions. Just as the child's spontaneous remark in the example above gave the teacher her cue, so too can a child's questions be a signal to the teacher of his readiness to learn.

Sometimes it is best for the teacher not to answer a child's "why" or "how" questions directly but to help him answer them himself. For example, if a child were to ask, "How can I get inside this house I made?" the teacher could say: "Well, can you think of what houses have to help you get inside them?" Or, less abstractly, "How do you get inside your house?" The teacher, then, would be encouraging the child to solve a problem by pausing to think about his own experience and to relate that experience to his actions of the moment.

A teacher may want to answer some questions directly if she feels they represent an insight, a step forward in the child's understanding.

For example, if a child asks, "Why do we have to put flowers in water?" or "What makes a car go?" or "What makes clouds?" or "How come butter melts?" the teacher could answer directly (and of course simply), recognizing that by his question the child has shown he understands there are reasons and causes for things, and therefore he could profit from a simple explanation. The teacher should also consider what concrete experiences could make that explanation more meaningful to the child.

Preschool teachers will probably not find it useful to ask many "Why" or "How" questions. A child could easily be trained to respond by rote to the teacher's question, "Why do we have to put flowers in water?" ("because water is food for flowers"), but this would mean "packaging" the correct answer to a convergent question and having the child memorize it, with no indication that he understands or cares about either the question or the answer.

A question such as, "Is a giraffe as tall as a house?" could be answered by the child himself if he is given the opportunity to make the comparison. He could look at a giraffe at the zoo and at the same time would have to imagine how tall a house is. Again, the fact that the child can ask such a question should indicate to the teacher that he understands this type of relation between things and therefore should be encouraged to make further comparisons, even if his answers are "wrong" (that is, even if he decides that a giraffe is as tall as a house.)

Children want to learn new words, and they often ask what words mean. "What does ___ mean?" will come up in the course of listening to stories and in conversation between children and teacher if the teacher is not "talking down" to the children and only using words they know. For ideas to be communicated to others, new words must be learned, and the child must understand that words do mean something, that they describe reality. One way to help a child remember new words is to act out their meaning. For example, some children hear the word "drowsy" in a story and want to know what it means. The teacher explains that it means "sleepy." The next day, the children are playing house and pretending to go to sleep; the teacher encourages them to make believe they're drowsy.

3. Preparing Children To Read and Write

Everything children learn about spoken language prepares them for reading and writing. In addition to the techniques we have just talked about for encouraging children to speak and to represent experience and solve problems with the help of spoken language, we suggest some specific pre-reading goals and methods. You will find a statement on these in the paper Levels of Representation: The Sign Level.

The main objectives discussed in that paper are:

1. Familiarizing children with the purposes of reading and writing using the Language Experience approach.

2. Making available experiences with the sounds of words (rhyming, alliteration), the written letters and the sounds represented by letters to individual children who are motivated to pursue these activities.